

## **The Streets where the Dragons Dance: The Street Life of Calcutta's Chinatowns**

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the history and the socio-political and cultural life of the streets of Calcutta's Chinatowns through an examination of the gradual assimilation of Chinese immigrants that fostered the existing cosmopolitan character of the city. After providing the history of Chinese immigration to the city, the essay highlights the civic, political, economic, and cultural life of the streets of the Chinatowns, where each section chronologically examines how the influx of other Indian communities, political instability, urban development, and rise of capitalist enterprises influenced and transformed the Chinese street life.

**Keywords:** Chinatown, cultural hybridity, Chinese immigration, Cold War, Sun Yat-sen Street, Tangra, Calcutta

On 1 July 1967, on a rainy afternoon, Effa Ma, a woman of Chinese origin with her three children, arrived in Calcutta from the Deoli detention camp of Rajasthan. She was detained there for almost five years under the Preventive Detention Act, which was passed to protect India during the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962, from the people of Chinese origin whom the government perceived as a threat to India's sovereignty. Ma's enthusiasm to return from the detention camp vanished as she was ordered to queue up at the Foreigner registration office at Howrah to share information about her final destination. During the interrogation, she beseeched the officers, "I don't know anybody in Calcutta, I don't have any money. In this rain where will I go (?)...You open the jail. I will go back to the jail where at least I will have a roof."<sup>1</sup> After her request got denied, she asked them to contact the Chinese embassy in New Delhi when the police replied, "there is no such thing as a Chinese embassy anymore. There's only a caretaker."<sup>2</sup> Like Ma, countless families of Chinese origin encountered the wrath of the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962. After the war ended, many Chinese families of Calcutta and other parts of India were encouraged by the government to return to China, but a section of the Chinese population stayed back due to their socio-economic and cultural ties with the city that date back to the colonial era.

Since the late seventeenth century, Calcutta emerged as a vital trading port for European traders in India. With the expansion of the British colonial stronghold in the country by the late eighteenth century, the city was transformed into a military and administrative hub for the colonizers, which led to the conglomeration of various trades, businesses, and people from varying

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<sup>1</sup> Joy Ma and Dilip D'Souza, *The Deoliwallahs: The True Story of the 1962 Chinese-Indian Internment* (London: MacMillan, 2020), 126-127.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-127.

cultures and nationalities. In fact, for centuries India and China have shared a vibrant socio-cultural life of the streets of Calcutta's Chinatowns and the Chinese community residing on them.

India and China long shared a history of socio-economic and cultural rapport. Accordingly, the presence of Chinese communities in India enormously influenced Bengal's economic and cultural milieu, particularly in the highly populated city of Calcutta.<sup>3</sup> Various stories of the first Chinese immigrants to the city have been wrought with popular interpretations and legends, but one well-documented report of the Chinese presence in the city could be traced back to 1778, when a tea seller named Yang Dazhao of China came to Calcutta and received land from Warren Hastings, the then Governor-General of the East India Company, and set up a sugar mill in the area presently known as Atchipur based on his nickname Atchew.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the late eighteenth century, the British East India Company's plans to transform Calcutta into an administrative hub resulted in an influx of trades and businesses to the city, such as European shoemakers, "...petty 'shroffs' and 'poddars' (money-changers); goldsmiths; Portuguese, Armenian and Bengali auctioneers; Indian watch-makers and repairers; oakum-sellers; watchmen of shops; peddlers; washermen; darners; carpet-menders; sellers of old clothes; labourers; sailors; boatmen; porters and other different classes of manual workers and servants."<sup>5</sup>

After the British colonization of India, the opium wars (1839-42) between the European powers and the Chinese hampered the economic lives of the skilled Chinese laborers in their country. Their failure to compete with the machine-made cheap western goods led to mass unemployment and forced migration of Chinese workers to other countries of South and Southeast Asia in search of employment. Consequently, Chinese immigration to Calcutta increased in the early nineteenth century, as they traveled to the colonial city to make a fortune from British businesses. Moreover, the Charter Act of 1833 resulted in the creation of Indian tea plantations in Darjeeling and Assam "[whereby] Chinese labourers were procured through effective networks of labor recruitment that were established in Singapore and Penang as it was believed that they were familiar with the procedures required to obtain finest tea leaves and that they were more effective, dependable and skilled to deal with these original samples from their country."<sup>6</sup>

As time progressed, the arrival of the Chinese population gradually increased in Calcutta due to its geographical location suitable for overseas trade, tea plantations, carpentry business on the docks, and the high demand for Chinese shoemakers, leading to a concentration of Chinese workers and their families along the roads of modern-day Sun Yatsen Street, Bentinck Street, Chatawala Gali, and Lu Hsien Sarani of the Bowbazar-Tiretta Bazar region of central Calcutta. The area surrounding these streets came to be known as the first Chinatown of the city. The political instability in China as a result of the Chinese Civil War since the late 1920s forced several

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<sup>3</sup> For the convenience of readers, I will use the term "Calcutta" throughout my essay, although in 2001, the West Bengal government officially changed the city's name to "Kolkata."

<sup>4</sup> Zhang Xing and Tansen Sen, "The Chinese in South Asia," in *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Diaspora*, ed. Chee-Beng Tan (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 206.

<sup>5</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, "City of Dreadful Night: Crime and Punishment in Colonial Calcutta," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38, no. 21 (May 2003), 2046.

<sup>6</sup> Nabanipa Majumder, "Making of 'British National Beverage': Imperialist Policy of Tea Plantation in Colonial India," *International Research and Reviews Journal*, 4(2)(II) (April-June 2015), 15.

Chinese to leave their country and settle down in Calcutta, where they had a strong diasporic connection which further shaped the vibrant street life of the first Chinatown. Furthermore, after India's independence in 1947, its rising hostility with China during the years leading up to the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962 changed the landscape of Chinese settlement in the Tiretta Bazar area. The prohibition on Chinese movements throughout the city, on the grounds of suspicious behavior, forced a section of the Chinese population to the southern parts of the city known as Tangra, a place from where they used to collect raw leather since the early twentieth century, that popularized the second Chinatown of the city situated along the streets like the Matteswartala Road and Christopher Road in the Tangra region.

The growing number of Chinese immigrants in the streets since the first half of the nineteenth century altered the city's physical appearance. The Chinese migrating to Calcutta were both skilled and unskilled workers who were accompanied in the succeeding years by other Chinese professionals and religious emissaries, but the most distinctive groups in Calcutta's first Chinatown were the Cantonese carpenters, the Hakka shoemakers, and the Hubei dentists. The streets of Chinatown and their unique architectural and living traditions separated the area from the rest of Calcutta, and this unique space that the Chinese migrants created enabled the colonizers to view it as barbaric yet exotic. To depict the streets of the first Chinatown, many British officials vented their disgust about the clumsy lifestyle, filthiness, and lawlessness of that locality. An article by Thomas Taylor Meadows was published in the *Calcutta Review* of 1858 under the theme "The Chinese Colony in Calcutta,"<sup>7</sup> where he accentuated that the Chinese streets were infamous for the foul smell from the tanneries since their birth, and the Chinese considered it a part of their lives as has been taught through generations. It further claimed that the Chinese found the aesthetic inconsistency between their living spaces and workplaces unworthy of attention. The article stated that "[s]o our rich shoemakers and carpenters retire hitherto be lulled to sleep by the sweet murmurs of their porkers and awakened by the balmy breezes which proceed from their factory chimneys, quite regardless of the want of harmony between their pretty bungalows and the surrounding pigsties."<sup>8</sup> This civic condition remained the same even in the late nineteenth century when residents of Bentinck street expressed their concern in the local newspapers regarding the minimal sanitary sense of their Chinese neighbors. Furthermore, Meadows provided a contemptuous narrative of the Chinese reliance on opium addiction that rightfully mirrored the colonial authority's attitude against the unprofessionalism and disgust accompanying such addiction. He stated, "[t]he only business to any extent undertaken by the shoemakers is that of the preparation and sale of opium and *charas*, which they probably have taken to as lucrative, and reminding them of home. All about Durrumtollah and the little lanes leading out of Cossitollah, you will see blackboards informing the public that they are licensed to retail opium, *ganja*, and such like articles."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Taylor Meadows, "The Chinese and Their Rebellions Viewed in Connection with Their National Philosophy, Ethics, Legislation, and Administration; to Which is Added an Essay on Civilization and Its Present State in the East and West," *Calcutta Review*, art. IV.-1, XXXI, (July-December 1858), 368.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

During the early twentieth century, government reports emphasized the insalubrious living condition of the Chinese households in the Chatawala Gali, where the buildings tenanted by Chinese inhabitants appeared as barracks where each building contained almost seventy residents who paid a rent of eight rupees per room.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the growing Chinese presence, the Bengali community living in Chatawala Gali and Lu Hsien Sarani shared their physical spaces with their Chinese neighbors since the late nineteenth century and expressed much less repugnance than their colonial masters as they profited from renting a portion of their houses to Chinese families. The ethnic blending because of economic opportunities created a creole of Bengali-Chinese community along the streets of Tiretta Bazar and Bow Bazar area. In another instance, one recollection of Chinese tenants in their family home, a member of the Seal family reminisced the days when Chinese shoemakers were their tenants and stated that even though the Chinese had a hard life and lived poorly, they were so addicted to opium that they would often use up their rent for it and hence the landlord had to be diligent in collecting rent every day.<sup>11</sup>

During the colonial period, the gradual development of Tiretta Bazar, because of the construction of government and private administrative buildings along with an increase in different economic activities, managed to draw the attention of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. The urge to improve the civic conditions of the streets of Tiretta Bazar locality led to the removal of tanneries from the area. During the post-colonial period, the urban development plans of the government led to the further fracturing of the first Chinatown when the old Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) road was divided into Sun Yatsen Street and Chatawala Gali.<sup>12</sup> The border skirmish led the Indian government to restrict people of Chinese origin from acquiring government jobs and assigned army officials and intelligence to identify students with Chinese last names, whereas Chinese clubs, educational institutions, and other socio-cultural activities were restricted. The fear of the presence of Chinese spies in Calcutta and other Indian cities led to the mass detention of the Chinese throughout the country, particularly in the Deoli detention camp in Rajasthan. The Government of India passed two consecutive acts, the Defense of India Act of 1962 and the Enemy Property Act of 1968, which led to the seizure of Chinese properties throughout India and in Calcutta's Sun Yatsen Street, Bentinck Street, Chatawala Gali, and Lu Hsien Sarani; such properties were either auctioned off by the government or taken over by the local people. Such an incursion into the lives of the Chinese of Tiretta Bazar witnessed the forcible implementation of an open display of their loyalty to India by hoisting the Indian national flag and putting up pictures of Mahatma Gandhi beside the image of Sun Yatsen in all private Chinese residences, schools, and institutions on the streets of Chinatowns. Any allegiance towards the communist government and Mao Zedong was met with suspicion and harassment, whereas allegiance to the nationalist govern-

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<sup>10</sup> Arpita Bose, "The Chinese in Calcutta: A Study on Settlement and Demographical Patterns," *Indian Historical Review* 46, no. 1 (June 2019), 142.

<sup>11</sup> Soumitra Das, *A Jaywalker's Guide to Calcutta* (Mumbai: Eminence Designs Pvt. Ltd., 2007), 135-136.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

ment of Chiang Kai-shek was approved and allowed.<sup>13</sup> Because of this political turmoil, the number of Chinese people living along these streets reduced significantly, and curtailment of their economic activities through property confiscation allowed other ethnic communities to take up space for their businesses.

The gradual incursion of non-Chinese ethnic communities, particularly the Bihari Muslims, into the first Chinatown transformed the inherent characteristic and design of the locality with the creation of multistoried buildings. The forces of unionization among the other ethnic communities drove the Chinese further out of Bentinck Street, and their famous shoe shops were taken over by the locals. Zhang Xing, in her article, incorporated the experience of a renowned reporter Anne de Henning when she visited Calcutta's First Chinatown in the early 1970s. Henning mentions, "side by side stand the smallest synagogue and smallest mosque in town, and also two-storied, red brick house. . . . But nearby I see a Chinese temple with a curlicued roof, . . . and shops with signs in Chinese. They are there to testify that this is what remains of a Chinese settlement."<sup>14</sup> By the mid-1980s, the flourishing Chinese community had dispersed from the Tiretta Bazar area leaving behind a handful of families who carried on with their business of restaurants that were famous for their specialty dishes and the occasional sighting of Chinese vendors and the scarcely visited Chinese antique stores in the Chatawala Gali provide the evidence of a unique period of history within Calcutta's Chinatown.<sup>15</sup>

Besides political instability, the predilection of the modern urban society to go beyond the idea of perceiving urban streets as an integral part of socio-cultural and economic interaction led to the decline in the status of the streets of Chinatown to accommodate the administrative and economic needs of the city. The increase in the number of economic enterprises and administrative buildings in the strategically important area of central Calcutta steered the urban planners to replace the fragments of Chinese street life with corporate houses, government, and non-governmental offices. Sun Yatsen Street, Bentinck Street, Chatawala Gali, and Lu Hsien Sarani, which once were pulsating with Chinese cultural heritage, were gradually transmuting into a concrete passageway connecting different localities. Chinese shops have been closing, and the number of vendors on these Chinese streets is presently shrinking, which is reducing the exclusivity of the Chinese food businesses in the area.

Nevertheless, the decline of the first Chinatown and the gradual growth of the second Chinatown due to the Sino-Indian conflict strengthened the street life of the Tangra region. The increasing demand for leather goods during the Second World War benefitted the Hakka Chinese community. After the Sino-Indian conflict, their relative economic stability fostered the development of the Tangra region with the construction of large tanneries like Fo Shien Tannery and Shui Yuan Tannery on South Tangra Road. Throughout the 1970s, Chinese schools like Grace Ling Liang English School and Pei Moi Chinese School were established, and numerous restaurants

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<sup>13</sup> Rishika Mukhopadhyay, "Charting Ethnic Violence through the Lens of Heritage: Engaging with the Indo-Chinese Population of Kolkata," *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Etnograficzne* 45, no. 2 (2017), 169.

<sup>14</sup> Zhang Xing, "The Bowbazar Chinatown," *India International Centre Quarterly*, 36, no. 3/4 (2009), 408.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

were set up along the streets of Matteswartala Road and Christopher Road in Tangra, which despite being narrow and dingy, attracted a large number of customers daily. Conversely, the attractiveness of the streets of Tangra did not appease the security concerns of the non-Chinese residents. Ellen Oxfeld's work mentions a statement made by a local college student: "Tangra is considered a rather unsafe area for a variety of reasons . . . the moment somebody mentions Tangra the two things you think of are Chinese, and you don't want to be there . . . and people are rather intrigued by the Chinese because they have, you know, they have their 'walled city' [an allusion to the appearance of the tanneries from afar] . . . there are these huge walls, and you can't see inside."<sup>16</sup>

By the late twentieth century, endeavors of civic development and concerns for safety on the streets of Tangra led the then government to undertake new infrastructural projects that renewed obstacles for Chinese economic activities in the streets of Tangra's Chinatown while reducing the architectural distinctiveness of the Chinese streets. During the 1990s, the West Bengal Pollution Control Board began to emphasize and address the increasing pollution caused by the tanneries in Tangra and issued a notice per the Supreme Court Order of 1992 to control the waste disposal and environmental concerns from the tanneries. The need for relocating such businesses was demanded throughout the 1990s, and in 1996 the Apex Court issued an order to relocate Tangra's tanneries to the Karaidanga-Gangapur-Bhatipotta area of the South 24 Parganas.<sup>17</sup> The West Bengal government subsequently established the Calcutta Leather Complex in this region to house the tanneries whose owners had to pay 25% of the cost of the land before 28 February 1997, and failure to pay the amount would lead to a shutdown.<sup>18</sup> With the beginning of the twenty-first century, most of these abandoned tanneries on Tangra have become valuable construction sites for residential complexes for the city due to their proximity to the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport, and therefore the Indian-Chinese face a dilemma of losing their traditional businesses to further their future economic prospects from the new development.

At present, the population of the second Chinatown has considerably reduced to a few thousand Chinese families, where most have left the tannery business and opened up restaurants. Despite the West Bengal government's efforts to improve the civic conditions of the Chinese streets in Tangra to foster its tourist attractiveness, the poor drainage system which existed since the inception of the locality caused frequent waterlogging, especially in the monsoon season, leading to the breeding ground for malaria and other water-borne diseases. In a *Times of India* report of 2018, the secretary of a South Tangra Chinese Youth Association stated, "Though it rained just a little, the road remained underwater for over five days. If it rains again, the entire stretch will get inundated. Even now, residents without cars are being forced to make a nearly 2-

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<sup>16</sup> Ellen Oxfeld, "Still 'Guest People': The Reproduction of Hakka Identity in Calcutta, India," in *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad*, ed. Nicole Constable (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 160.

<sup>17</sup> Mrinal Biswas, "Chinese-Owned Tanneries Face Extinction Calcutta," *Business Standard*, 18 April 1997, accessed on 20 December, 2020, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/specials/chinese-owned-tanneries-face-extinction-calcutta-197041801078\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/specials/chinese-owned-tanneries-face-extinction-calcutta-197041801078_1.html).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

km detour to access Chinatown via Gobinda Khatik Road.”<sup>19</sup> The dire conditions of the alleys along these streets due to lack of maintenance and heavy rain often leave the Chinese grocery stores and street vendors without any business for a substantial amount of time.

Though the streets of Calcutta’s Chinatowns weathered through political turbulences and civic developments, its history stands witness to the transformation of this exclusive Chinese physical space that was seen as a place of awe and ridicule that hints toward oriental despotism. The occidental project of gaining knowledge about the orient made its way to the streets of Chinatown, where colonial caricatures like the one evident in Meadows’s article institutionalized the hyperbolic portrayal of the Chinese streets as grimy and unsafe, a legitimate epistemological discourse. Even with their pride in putting Calcutta on the world map by allowing the city to become a cosmopolitan place, the colonizer maintained their conscious distance from the streets of Chinatown, a mentality that later transcended to the Bengali elites of the city. These streets of the Chinatowns provide a concoction of material experiences like Chinese decoration on the gates of the Chinese households, the Chinese shops, the fortress-like structure of the tanneries in Tangra, and sensory experiences like the smell of pork chops, dumplings, and leather, that provided the people of the city with a distinct perception of this urban space.

These streets, thus, created a sense of imagined geography that led the native people of Calcutta to often perceive them with skepticism. An overpopulation, poor drainage system, and crime on the streets of Chinatown often appeared in the pages of newspapers, magazines, and public discourse, which made the Chinese more culpable as delinquents of society. In reality, different migratory working-class communities from all over India residing in Calcutta are equally prone to violating the urban space because of their unlawful and unhygienic activities, and yet, their architectural and cultural homogeneity with the rest of the city made it hard to suspect someone from the non-Chinese communities for misusing the urban space. Although the socio-cultural and economic activities of the Chinese created a distinct identity for a particular urban space, the urban planners’ altruistic choice of embracing the Chinese population by naming a street after Sun-Yat Sen and their decision to build a Chinese-styled gate at the entrance of the second Chinatown reinforced the idea of imagined geography by designating a place just for the Chinese people. These attempts, regardless of its commendable intention, perhaps created a sense of binary about what is Chinese and what is not and generated a sense of boundary whose “internal homogeneity and order are valued and [that] there is a concern with boundary maintenance to keep out objects or people who don’t fit into the shared classification (or culture) constructed by the dominant group (the insiders). The regularity of design and the high visibility of internal boundaries, which interrupt traditional patterns of social organization, make what is culturally different appear disruptive and deviant.”<sup>20</sup> This idea of suspicion not always remained confined to the local people but equally created a sense of anxiety for the administration. The following section discusses the political life

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<sup>19</sup> Times News Network, “Waterlogging: Tangra Locals Allege Civic Apathy,” *Times of India*, 6 April, 2018, accessed on 20 December, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/waterlogging-tangra-locals-allege-civic-apaty/articleshow/63636457.cms>.

<sup>20</sup> Karen Malone, “Street Life: Youth, Culture and Competing Uses of Public Space,” *Environment and Urbanization*, 14, no. 2 (October 2002), 158.

of these Chinese streets and how it created social anxiety and mistrust for Calcutta's locals, which in turn resulted in the misery of numerous innocent Chinese.

Apart from the unique civic life of the Chinese streets, the presence of Chinese political activities along the streets of the Chinatowns also distinguished them from the local people of Calcutta. For the first generations of Chinese immigrants, the local political affairs of the city did not draw their attention because, for them, Calcutta was a place of economic opportunism rather than political activism. Their purpose was to earn money and support their extended families who were residing in China, and the Chinese political situation mattered more to them than the Indian freedom struggle and the post-independent political affairs. Most of them tried politically and economically to support the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) government through the local party offices. They attempted to attract politically demotivated Chinese to embrace the KMT ideology by organizing meetings and rallies in the streets of the Chinatowns. The nature of such political activities along the streets of central Calcutta and the Tangra region was alien to the locals of Calcutta. The Chinese detachment from Indian political affairs and their inclination towards Chiang Kai Shek or Mao, about whom Bengalis had hardly any idea, created a sense of apprehension among the people of the host community.

The streets of the Tiretta Bazar and Tangra area witnessed the presence of various Chinese political organizations like the KMT party offices and the Chinese political presses. The first KMT headquarters was established on 15 Weston Street, and a branch was later opened in 1923 on 31 Chatawala Gali in the Tiretta Bazar area. The Chinese economic prosperity since the 1920s enabled Chinese immigrants from Tiretta Bazar and Tangra to collect funds to support the KMT government. Bentinck Street and Chatawala Gali witnessed massive fund-raising activities where the Chinese clubs in this area used to gamble and raise money to be sent to Sun Yatsen in 1922-23, a sum of which amounted to fifty thousand rupees during that time.<sup>21</sup> A fundraiser was organized during the late 1920s in the streets of the Tiretta Bazar when the local KMT headquarters collected funds through processions organized by the Women's branch of the KMT in 1927 and other groups for Salvation of China and Relief of Tsinan Victim's fund in 1928.<sup>22</sup> Other organizations that prominently carried out their fundraisers on these streets included the Chinese Workers Club (Sin-Min-Kong-Fu), the Koong-Yon Cooperative Society, the Labourer's and Friends Society, and the Chinese Welfare and Mutual Aid Association.<sup>23</sup> The Chinese community in Calcutta observed a National Humiliation Day on 28 May 1928, when, as directed by the KMT headquarters in Calcutta, all Chinese economic activities were halted, and Chinese schools, shops, restaurants, and cultural organizations remained closed to express solidarity against the Japanese imperialist intrusion in China.<sup>24</sup>

During the late 1940s, the political activities of the KMT in Calcutta began to increase, thereby resulting in the opening of more offices in the Tangra and Howrah regions. The distribu-

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<sup>21</sup> Arpita Bose, "The Kuomintang in India with Special Reference to Calcutta (1900–1962)," *Studies in History (Sahibabad)*, 32, no. 2 (2016), 262.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

tion of pamphlets in the streets of Tangra and the Tiretta Bazar was essential for the KMT Chinese to achieve the above-mentioned goal. During the decisive periods of Chinese history, especially the Civil War, these streets would be filled with pamphlets and posters that would display the political nature of the community living on them. After the Chinese Revolution and Mao's ascendance to the government, the streets of Tiretta Bazar and Tangra experienced substantial political turmoil. India's stance after its independence to support the Communist regime in China facilitated curbing the KMT activities in the two Chinatowns of the city and contributed to the rise of communist sympathizers within Calcutta's Chinese community. Political fights between the Chinese communists and the KMT sympathizers drastically altered the safety of Sun Yatsen Street, Bentinck Street, Chatawala Gali, and Lu Hsien Sarani of Tiretta Bazar as well as Matteswartala Road and Christopher Road in Tangra. The reports of the Intelligence Bureau of the West Bengal State Government repeatedly highlighted political robbery, destruction of public and private properties, and murder in the streets of the Chinatowns. After India's independence, the support of the Indian government towards the new communist government of China resulted in the deportation of Chinese sympathizers of the Taiwan government. The consulate of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Calcutta was allowed to openly fund the press and local businesses with orders from Beijing for communist supporters. This favorable situation for the Chinese communists was short-lived as by the mid-1950s, the Tibetan crisis and the deteriorating relations between the PRC and the Government of India over the latter's grant of asylum to the exiled Dalai Lama altered the political landscape of the streets of Calcutta's Chinatowns that began to witness protest activities and petitions against the communist Chinese government by a sizeable section of the Chinese residents.

These increased political activities within a limited space designated voluntarily or involuntarily by the host society led to a redirection of government surveillance of the Chinese localities of the city. The Chinese schools of Calcutta became the bastion of Chinese political propaganda campaigns and the streets of Chinatowns, particularly 6 New Tangra Road, 59 South Tangra Road, and the Great China Tannery on 47 South Tangra Road turned into a laboratory of the Nationalist Chinese political activism. The schools like Meiguang and Pei Mei were known for their pro-Taiwanese stance in contrast to other schools that were established by the Consulate General of the PRC, like Xinghua Middle School situated on 170/2 Lower Circular Road in central Calcutta in 1951 and Zhongguo School in 1952, signified their pro-communist nature.<sup>25</sup> An Indian intelligence report of 1951 described how the Xinghua Middle School was decorated with the photograph of Mao Zedong and Sun Yatsen and stated that the school had become a center for spreading pro-communist propaganda campaigns.<sup>26</sup> In January 1952, a complaint was lodged with the Tollygunge Police Station, where the rodomontade ideological conversation between the KMT and the Communist Chinese resulted in a heavy disturbance. The report mentions, "In the evening of 13.1.52 a meeting of the Communist Chinese was held in Tsing Wah School at 172/2, Lower

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<sup>25</sup> Zhang Xing, *Preserving Cultural Identity through Education: The Schools of the Chinese Community in Calcutta, India*, (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2010), 41.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

Circular Road where they decided to set fire at the tanneries of South Tangra Road belonging to Nationalist Chinese and also forcibly occupied the Chinese Nationalist School at South Tangra Road. . . . Necessary forces with wireless van was posted in Iswar Mandal Lane, Chinese School. A great tension is prevailing amongst both the groups of the Chinese of the above locality and there is every chance of great trouble there.”<sup>27</sup> The tanneries, along with the schools, were the focal point of all KMT and Chinese Communist meetings, where agents of both groups would hold secret discussions regarding the ouster of their opposition from the area or their murder. With regard to the spheres of influence in the streets of Chinatowns, the Communists had always been more economically well-funded than the Nationalists. An intelligence report of the West Bengal government on 20 May 1968 recorded a secret meeting at Chin Hsiu tannery where a Chinese Communist agent Huang Tseng Sheng arrived from Pakistan with the help of the Chinese Embassy and had planned murders of KMT sympathizers. He offered another agent Li Yao Li five thousand rupees to execute the plan.<sup>28</sup> Another report of the West Bengal Intelligence Bureau in 1971 mentioned the possibility of a smuggling ring on 35 Bentinck Street when they reported a possible Communist Chinese suspect by the name Li Tsai Fan who would smuggle gold and opium from Singapore to sell them in the streets of Calcutta.<sup>29</sup>

With the escalating tensions because of the Sino-Indian War and the ensuing hostile relations that lingered between India and China, the skepticism about the Chinese activities along these streets received validation. The Chinese people residing in these areas fell victim to social and political bullying from the members of the host society. The local people of the city followed a Durkheimian ideal of punishment where retribution was seen as a process to appease the society whose moral values had been shattered by the offender’s crime. The humiliation that India suffered during the Sino-Indian conflict resulted in extreme animosity against China among the people of the host society, and their inability to channel their resentment in this situation led them to target the Chinese community. The streets of the Chinatowns became a place for asserting dominance where the host society expressed their national indignation by identifying the Chinese as anti-national. A hyperbolic nationalist manifestation of the host society gradually pushed the Chinese of Calcutta into the abyss of mistrust. They became targets of popular nationalist over-reactions, particularly due to government-sponsored anti-Chinese activities and propaganda campaigns that sought to restore the glory of the Indian army, which was suffering a humiliating defeat on the Himalayan borders. These activities sought to instill a deep sense of nationalistic sentiment that would “provide rationales for organizational activities, legitimacy for the demands the system makes on members.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>28</sup> West Bengal Intelligence Bureau, File No. 236-71 (Chinese) (24 P), Serial No. 632/57 (1), *Foreign Relations*, Calcutta, 1971.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> John Delamater, Daniel Katz, and Herbert C. Kelman, “On the Nature of National Involvement: A Preliminary Study,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 13, no. 3 (September 1969): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200276901300303>.

The then Congress-led government in West Bengal organized meetings and rallies condemning the Chinese encroachment and encouraged the Bengalis to participate in the war effort actively. People were encouraged to donate gold ornaments, food, and even blood to the wounded soldiers. At the same time, the print media did their part by pushing government propaganda through their columns and showcasing cartoons and anti-Chinese slogans. One of the leading Bengali newspapers, *Jugantar*, reported that the Diwali festival of the city in 1962 was less vibrant as the organizers decided to reduce the extravagance to express solidarity with the Indian army.<sup>31</sup> The people of Indian origin in the city, like the rest of the country who felt vulnerable to the Chinese attacks at the border, channelized their national indignation by participating in carnival-like events where they often burned the effigies of Mao Zedong and Chou En-lai on the city's streets. For instance, on 3 November 1962, the West Bengal unit of the Praja Socialist Party organized a protest march to the Chinese Consulate in Calcutta, where the effigies of Mao were burnt.<sup>32</sup> The artists of West Bengal equally helped intensify the anti-Chinese rhetoric, and observing this sentiment run through the entire state of West Bengal, a renowned Bengali playwright Utpal Dutt mentioned with regret how “a famous cartoonist made his famous character say, ‘the Chinese multiply like swine.’ Terms borrowed from the garbage heap of imperialistic lies – yellow peril, yellow menace and yellow hoarders – began to figure in the contribution of ‘famous writers.’”<sup>33</sup>

A steady anti-Chinese propaganda campaign not only aggrandized but also received passive validation of the anti-Chinese skepticism of the host society. The Chinese houses in the streets of both Chinatowns became susceptible to stone-pelting. Apart from being compelled to shut down their economic activities, many Chinese had to tolerate racial Lalochezia in the streets from the members of the host society. Chris Liu, one of the then-Chinese residents of Chatawala Gali, recalls, “I remember Mr. Ma, the principal of our Chinese language school, canceling all extracurricular sports like basketball and table tennis, so that we could go home before dark. I recall my mother finding a knife on my brother, Fu, and taking it from him. Chinese boys had decided to carry knives after a group of Indian youths had beaten several of them.”<sup>34</sup>

The streets became a space of scrutiny and hostility by the locals who targeted the entire Chinese community in a similar manner, irrespective of the apparent differences between the Chinese Communists and the Chinese Nationalists and their varied loyalties in China. Although a handful of the Chinese residing in the city was engaged in questionable political activities, the greater number of the Chinese people in Calcutta who supported or remained neutral towards the Indian government's responses during the Sino-Indian conflict fell victim to intimidation and radicalized expression of nationalism.

For a considerable amount of time, the de-escalation of the Sino-Indian conflict, to an extent, mitigated the political animosity against the Chinese community, and the streets of Chinatowns restored its glory by upholding its legacy as a space of socio-cultural and economic inter-

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<sup>31</sup> *Jugantar*, 26, no. 30 (19 October 1962), 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Utpal Dutt, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), 47.

<sup>34</sup> Kwai-Yun Li, “Deoli Camp: An Oral History of the Chinese Indians from 1962 to 1966,” Master's thesis, University of Toronto, 2011, 74.

action rather than political antagonism. But the recent tensions surrounding the Sino-Indian stand-off in the Doklam valley in 2017, the Galwan valley in 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic gave new impetus to the hatred against the Chinese community, who, in reality, are now Indian citizens. The boycott of Chinese goods, a trend that gained a steady momentum because of the deteriorating political relation with China, started to impact the street life of Calcutta's Chinatowns again. Chinese restaurants are experiencing drastically low customers in the Chinatown area. P. Chung of the Indian Chinese Youth Association mentioned, "When the standoff at Doklam took place in 2017, the footfall at our restaurants dropped drastically."<sup>35</sup> Experiencing the invective remarks and racial animosity on the streets against the Indian-Chinese community, a 65-year-old tannery owner Francis Yee Lepcha bewailed by stating, "we are voters here and most of us were born and brought up here. But there are some uneducated bunch of hooligans, who do not know history and culture . . . call us names. They shout slogans when they see us and ask us to go back."<sup>36</sup>

The trials and tribulations surrounding the evolution and erosion of the Chinese streets of Calcutta have hardly received importance in the popular historical narrative of the city, irrespective of the sustained curiosity regarding the lives of the Chinatowns. A street's role in constructing a spatial identity often separates a locality from another, but it certainly serves as an arena where interaction, adaptation, and formulation of a syncretic identity take place. It is thus far described how the Chinese streets' civic and political lives generated an insulated perception among the people of the host society about both the Chinatowns. The final section demonstrates the syncretic role that the streets of Chinatowns played in forming an amalgam of cultures and shows how economic and cultural drives compelled them to depend on each other.

As mentioned before, the streets of the Chinatowns were inhabited mainly by three distinct groups of Chinese immigrants: the Cantonese, Hakka, and Hubei Chinese. The Cantonese carpenters were skilled laborers who were employed in the Hooghly docks and carpentry factories in Calcutta during the colonial period. On the contrary, the Hakkas were primarily unskilled laborers who acquired leatherwork skills from Southeast Asian countries and in India, particularly in the tanneries established in the city. With the gradual prosperity of the Hakkas, their settlement grew in Bentinck Street in the early twentieth century, which came to be regarded as the "shoe road,"<sup>37</sup> and the Chitpur road leading up to the Bara Bazaar in Central Calcutta was lined with Chinese shoe shops. Other Chinese groups, such as the Hubei dentists, settled in Calcutta with their families, particularly in the Chatawala Gali, and were renowned for their skills and low fees among the Chinese and non-Chinese communities. In the post-colonial period, Cantonese Chinese

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<sup>35</sup> Press Trust of India, "LAC Standoff: Kolkata's Chinese Community Wary of 1962 Rerun," *The New Indian Express*, 19 June, 2020, accessed on 20 December, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/kolkata/2020/jun/19/lac-standoff-kolkatas-chinese-community-wary-of-1962-rerun-2158564.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Madhuparna Das, "Indian Born of Chinese Origin- Kolkata's Chinatown is Stuck between Covid and Galwan," *The Print*, 26 June, 2020, <https://theprint.in/india/indian-born-of-chinese-origin-kolkatas-chinatown-is-stuck-between-covid-and-galwan/448470/>.

<sup>37</sup> Xing and Sen, "The Chinese in South Asia," 209.

carpenters were employed for their exquisite handiwork by popular hotel companies and theatres like the Metro Cinema on Esplanade in Central Calcutta.<sup>38</sup>

With time, several of them opened their own carpentry companies of which the Chen Canton Carpentry near Tiretta Bazaar and Wu's Carpentry and Engineering, established in 1965 by Ng Yee Tung<sup>39</sup> on 26 Robert Street near the Bowbazar Police Station became widely known. On the other hand, the Hakka Chinese completely moved to the peripheral region of Tangra by the 1960s, from where they could easily procure rawhide. The exponential growth of the number of Chinese shoe shops in the streets of Tiretta Bazaar and the Tangra area led them to venture into establishing their tanneries in the Tangra region, where the local lower caste Hindus and Muslims of Dhapa became the major suppliers of rawhide. However, when they were ordered to move their tanneries from Tangra due to environmental concerns by the government, a few of them switched to other businesses, such as poultry<sup>40</sup> and others shifted to a more profitable business of restaurants that enjoyed popularity since colonial times. Chinese restaurants in the heart of Calcutta's Chinatowns introduced not only authentic Chinese cuisines like a shark fin, duck, and pork preparations, but they inspired the Indian Chinese cuisine that rose to popularity among Calcutta's food connoisseurs. Popular restaurants established in the 1920s were the Nanking Restaurant on 22 Balckburn Lane and the Eau Chew Restaurant of Tiretta Bazaar, whose specialty lay in their family's secret recipes. Although restaurants were indeed the focus of the popularity of the Chinese streets of contemporary Calcutta, the presence of stores like Hap Hing and Pou Chong along the streets of Tiretta Bazaar that sold authentic Chinese sauces, handmade noodles, tea, and herbs made the locality alluring. More importantly, a large number of consumers were attracted by the local food vendors of Chatawala Gali, who, with their family recipes, filled the air with different aromas and provided the essence of a cultural syncretism through the mixture of Sichuan and Cantonese flavors with Bengali spices in cuisines that included salted vegetables, pork dumplings, sausages, and sweet rice delicacies. Applying Homi Bhaba's theory of cultural hybridity in discussing the emergence of a new cuisine in Calcutta, it can be said that the immigrant people, through their economic and cultural assimilation with the culture of the host population, introduced local spices and condiments in their recipes that led to the creation of distinct unique food culture in Calcutta. This intermixing of two cultures in the streets of the Chinatowns became a space where cultural hybridity generated a new form of Indian Chinese cuisine that was neither fully alien nor completely indigenous.

Another business that the Chinese population of Calcutta dominated since the late 1920s was dry cleaning which thrived in central Calcutta after the area surrounding the first Chinatown flourished as an important hub for economic and administrative activities. The removal of tanneries and strict regulation of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation to contain the outbreak of deadly diseases like malaria gradually altered the unhygienic character of the first Chinatown,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Liang, "Migration Patterns and Occupational Specialisations of Kolkata Chinese," *China Report (New Delhi)* 43, no. 4 (2007), 405.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 407.

which once had the reputation of being dingy. Establishments of hotels surrounding the first Chinatown and the subsequent influx of office workers proportionately impacted the laundry business due to the convenience of the office workers to drop off their clothes at Chinese dry cleaning stores on their way to work. Furthermore, the Chinese people residing in the first Chinatown had easy access to the nearby Hooghly River simply because of the geographical proximity of their locality, while the *Dhobis* (washermen) who were involved in the cleaning business were not skilled enough to handle the delicate clothes, unlike the Chinese. Also, the laundry business in Bengal for generations was dominated by the Muslim and a few Hindu communities of lower caste and class. This caste and class structure of Bengali society hindered a significant section of the Bengali population from getting associated with this business.

The owner of Shanghai Co., a dry cleaning house located on Russel Street, William Wong, mentioned how their formal training in the dry-cleaning business for generations helped them to assert their hegemony in this field. He specified, “back then, there was a three-year course on dry cleaning in China. In the first year, people received training on the washing process, the second year focused on ironing and the third year was specialization – cleaning or ironing. Our store had manager who had completed that course.”<sup>41</sup> These aforesaid reasons helped them to assert their monopoly over this business, and as James Lee, the owner of Golden China Cleaners at Bentinck Street, informs, “the average income can be anything between 10 thousand rupees and 20 thousand rupees per day during the peak season.”<sup>42</sup>

A lengthy history of Chinese presence and economic activities along the streets of both Chinatowns gained a reputation for the locality due to the availability of exquisite furniture, leather goods, and Chinese food and hence increasingly attracted members of the host society who subconsciously associated the area with the goods they can get there. Corporate companies and indigenous entrepreneurs identified the association of spatial identity with Chinese-made goods and decided to open their businesses in that area. Corporate shoemaking companies like *Nike*, *Adidas*, *Puma*, and interior designing houses like *Godrej Interio*, along with other smaller entrepreneurs, exploited this sentiment of the city that is associated with the streets of Chinatowns and opened their stores there. Similarly, non-Chinese businessmen established branches of their popular restaurant chains, like *Mainland China*, on the streets of the Tangra region, claiming many of the Chinese food enthusiasts away from the local Chinese restaurants, thereby further encroaching on the exclusive sphere of Chinatown. In describing how the process of hybridization works, Nestor Garcia Canclini in *Hybrid Cultures* argues that “at times this occurs in an unplanned manner or is the unforeseen result of processes of migration, tourism, and economic or communicational exchange. But often hybridization emerges from individual and collective creativity.”<sup>43</sup> Canclini’s

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<sup>41</sup>Bishwabijoy Mitra, “The Secrets of City’s Chinese Dry Cleaners,” *Times of India*, 25 January, 2018, [https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/the-secrets-of-citys-chinese-dry-cleaners/articleshow/62650238.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst&frm=mdr](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/the-secrets-of-citys-chinese-dry-cleaners/articleshow/62650238.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst&frm=mdr)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), XXVII.

argument of the effects of hybridization is evident here in discussing the encroachment of large corporate houses and restaurant chains that inherited the Chinese business acumen and their unique cuisine to make it more accessible to the general public. In doing so, the exclusivity of Indo-Chinese cuisine that was limited to the streets of the Chinatowns transcended its boundaries and gained popularity as a cuisine of the city rather than its creators.

Another important aspect of the Chinese street life in Calcutta is the cultural and religious celebrations that have always attracted people from different parts of the city. The Chinese residents, over the years, assimilated Hindu and Christian deities besides their own without the rituals and customs of these religions. Their expression and worship of Hindu deities like Kali in the streets of Chinatown were based on their monetary status and following the Chinese folk religious custom of burning paper money and other earthly objects. Their belief in reincarnation and the need for financial backing for the departed led them to continue the custom of burning currency as a means to acquire funds for their journey after death.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, in one instance, it was reported that a funeral ceremony of the father of one Chinese family saw a seven-week-long extravagant celebration on the streets of Tangra, with the family members burning an entire fiat car made out of paper and cellophane with a cutout of a chauffeur and real money for the gas as a parting gift for the father's journey to reincarnation.<sup>45</sup> With the construction of the famous Chinese *Kalibari* (Kali Temple) on 41 Mattheswartala Road by the Chinese residents of Tangra in 1998, it became an integral part of their economic and cultural lives. Every year, the Chinese New Year celebrations begin with the worship and offerings of ramen noodles, chop suey, and Chinese rice as *bhog* to the goddess Kali, which is then followed by food offerings on the streets. The main attraction of the festival is the dragon dance in the Chatawala Gali, Lu Hsien Sarani in the Tiretta Bazaar, and 24 South Tangra Road, followed by fireworks and cultural events where people from different communities participate. The preparation for the dragon dance starts at least two months before the actual celebration when the Chinese and non-Chinese communities alike come together to decorate the streets with Chinese lamps and lights. "Various Chinese clubs then hold lion and dragon dances, running through the lanes and by-lanes of the neighborhoods, during the day. They visit homes and shops, often receiving token gifts in red packets. The lion and dragon dancing are part of quintessential Chinese culture and are performed to usher in good luck and fortune. Bursting crackers is also a part of the festival."<sup>46</sup> These streets, therefore, witness the concoction of different communities of the Chinese, Bengalis, Biharis, and Marwaris, who shared this physical space of the streets in unison that further indicating the vibrant cosmopolitan nature of the city.

In retrospect, one might argue that the process of modernization and urban development, irrespective of its essentiality, tarnishes the remnants of the traditional socio-cultural heritage of a city for the betterment of its economic, administrative, and accommodative conditions. In this

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<sup>44</sup> Oxfeld, "Still 'Guest People,'" 171.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>46</sup> Uttara Gangopadhyay, "Don't Miss the Lunar New Year Celebrations in Kolkata's Twin China Towns, One in the Heart of the City and the Other in the Eastern Suburbs," *Outlook India*, 3 February, 2019, <https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/explore/story/69344/have-you-been-to-kolkatas-china-towns-during-the-lunar-new-year>.

process, the creation of multistoried buildings, flyovers, and architectural modifications, reduce the quality of street life and challenge a city's uniqueness. Yet, the vivacious lives and historical architecture of Sun Yatsen Street, Bentinck Street, Chatawala Gali, and Lu Hsien Sarani in the Tiretta Bazar and Bow Bazar area still remind us of its rich legacy, even with the presence of an overwhelming number of government office buildings. Nevertheless, since the gradual disappearance of the prosperity of Calcutta's first Chinatown, the state administration acted swiftly to preserve the second Chinatown in Tangra. As a part of these remodeling and preservation efforts, "the state government inaugurated a beautification project. . . . The Rupees 1 crore project aims to build a 50-ft high tower and a traditional Chinese gate on the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass."<sup>47</sup> Further developments would include decorations with Chinese lights and signs along these streets that would reflect medieval Chinese heritage.<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, in spite of a prolonged political instability that stymied the socio-cultural harmony between the host society and the Chinese-Indian community, as has been mentioned, the Chinese streets of the city proudly sustained signs of diversity. This cosmopolitanism allowed an item of furniture made in a Cantonese shop at Sun Yat-Sen Street to end up in a Bengali drawing room, whereas a Chinese vendor in the Chatawala Gali still attracts countless middle-class people of Calcutta to have their breakfast at a lower price to save money. Irrespective of the gradual infringement of corporate food chains in the streets of the Chinatowns, the relevance of authentic Chinese food, such as handmade noodles, exclusive home-made sauces, and traditional Chinese sweet delicacies, in and around Bentinck Street and Sun Yatsen Street, still holds sway over the Bengali taste buds, to an extent, that quotidian long queues on the streets of the Chinatowns are still visible. The Chinese streets of Calcutta, as a result, still foster a sense of cultural assimilation and political activism, where on the one hand, local political parties have made efforts to include the Chinese community during their election campaigns through Chinese graffiti on the walls of the streets of the Chinatowns, on the other hand, the Chinese Kali Temple serves as the common thread that binds the different communities together, thus safeguarding the last vestiges of the identity of Calcutta's Chinese streets.

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<sup>47</sup> Express News Service, "China Town Set for a Facelift," *Indian EXPRESS*, 16 February, 2010, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/china-town-set-for-a-facelift/580239/>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

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